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Expert moves: international comparative testing and the rise of expertocracy

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Through a sociological analysis of the knowledge and actors that have become central to international assessments, the paper focuses on the processes that influence the production of shared narratives and agendas, adopting the position that their existence is not organic, but rather the product of undertakings that often fabricate and manage, rather than strive for 'real' consensus. The paper suggests that limiting the analysis to the role of travel and exchanges of experts and policy-makers in the making of policy is, in fact, the construction of an 'ideal-type' of an international policy making world. Recent research on these encounters suggests that one needs to focus on actors' conflict and struggles, rather than processes of 'collective puzzling' (Heclo 1974). Using the concept of 'political work', as well as elements of Bourdieu's field theory, the paper shows the ways that international comparative testing in the field of education has not only offered policy makers with much needed data to govern, but has in fact almost fused the realms of knowledge and policy; expertise and the selling of undisputed, universal policy solutions have now drifted into one single entity and function.

Keywords: experts; Europeanisation; policy learning; political work.

Introduction

International comparative testing and its results have become the lifeblood of education governance in Europe and globally. This paper is located in the field of the transnational governance of education and aims to offer an explanation of the work of governing through a sociological analysis of the knowledge and actors that have become central to it over the last decade.

In particular, national educational systems have been increasingly regulated externally through OECD and EU performance measurement tools. These include a number of explicit regulatory mechanisms, which they either lead or support, such as the Open Method of Coordination or the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), as well as more 'implicit' governing technologies, such as large international comparative tests, which have had significant effects on the governing of European education systems and the governance of learning in Europe overall. This paper investigates the development of similar testing in the field of adult literacy. It regards these tests as critical, as their scope is progressively changing to blend learning with the societal and economic goals of measuring –and hence improving– labour market outcomes. I am equally interested in the knowledge produced through the 'test', as well as a sociology of the actors that construct and mobilise it. In particular, in regard to the EU, which European Commission actors participate in these developments, why and with what effects? What is the role of experts in producing and pushing this agenda forward?

The paper takes advantage of this major, currently unfolding development to examine the tensions in 'hard' and 'soft' governing forms. 'Hard' governing forms could be described as the continuous production of data to foster competition, for example target-setting, performance management, benchmarks and indicators, while newer 'soft' governing forms, appear to be operating through

attraction (Lawn and Grek 2012); in other words, drawing people in to take part in processes of mediation, brokering and 'translation' and embedding self-governance and steering at a distance through these processes and relations. Thus, I will focus on the processes of construction of international comparative testing more generally and especially in relation to adult skills, and examine the extent to, and means by which the 'political work' undertaken through them does not only represent a technocratic exercise in order to fabricate an improved measuring instrument, but also a political technology, which aims at securing consensus amongst participant actors and winning 'hearts and minds'. This, although not an officially declared mission, nevertheless is a recurrent theme of discussions not only in the field of international testing, but in other sites of international debate and decision-making as well (e.g. the EU2020 political agenda).

The paper builds on current ESRC-funded research entitled 'Transnational Policy Learning: A comparative study of OECD and EU education policy in constructing the skills and competencies agenda' (2010-2012)(RES-000-22-3429) and uses mainly qualitative data derived from observations, interviews and discourse analysis of policy materials. It is structured as follows: first, I give an overview of the global context within which international comparative testing has been emerging and continue by discussing the theoretical underpinnings of the research project the paper uses data from. I then move on to a discussion of three specific adult literacy studies, the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Study (ALL) and the Definition and Selection of Competencies project (DeSeCo) and finish off with a critique of the scholarly literature which sees the policy learning that emerges from the development of international comparative assessment as merely a process of consensus-building. Instead, I argue for the need to sociologically analyse knowledge and actors for the study of education governance in Europe today, by focusing not only on the common and collective processes of meaning-making but crucially on those less known and hidden conflicts and struggles amongst actors in the policy field.

1. The global context

This analysis is built onto three significant premises. First, that the demands of governing at a distance have resulted in the development of a complex and ever-evolving system of global accountability based on the calculation of national performance through the devising and –in some 'deviant' cases the stringent– monitoring of performance data. Second, the economic crisis which began in 2008 and has recently culminated in events that threaten the very existence of the monetary and indeed the European Union itself, appears to be directing governing efforts towards the construction of a new social contract between governments and populations, one that will not depend solely on the economy as an indicator of progress, but rather on more positive, 'soft' indicators such as learning and well-being. This, I would suggest is not simply a change of focus and political direction; rather, it constitutes a sustained effort to search and find legitimacy for the work of governing, at times when the latter has been increasingly disputed and even fought against in many European and world cities by 'indignant' citizens and especially the youth, whose future life chances education is meant to improve. Finally, the third premise builds on Massey's (2005) work on the limits of the geographical imagination of many scholars so far, who have put emphasis on the ways that the 'global' impacts on the 'national', but have failed to acknowledge the extent to which the national is critical, if not *the* critical element, in the formation of global policy agendas. Indeed, current research reinforces this argument, as it points towards the artificiality of 'levels' as distinct

boundaries of political activity and instead emphasises the interdependency of actors and travelling ideas in the framing of problems and policy directions (Grek 2010).

Indeed, current efforts by the OECD, the United Nations, the World Bank and the European Commission aim to 'move beyond GDP' (EC 2010; Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi 2009) and foster 'a global conversation' (Hall 2009) for the measurement of 'human progress'. According to the OECD, 'education [is] one of the key dimensions of progress' (Hall and Matthews 2008; 18). Further, education is often seen as instrumental to the development of attitudes and dispositions that will help counter 'megatrends', such as mistrust in national governments. International comparative testing appears then as much more than simply a statistical project; it has become part of consistent efforts to restore legitimacy and trust between populations and their governments. As Hall contends, 'building legitimacy requires potential users in the process, as well as technical experts. The most important role of indicator sets may be in framing the issues and defining the problems, rather than suggesting the solutions' (2009, no page numbers). The discursive construction of international comparative assessments is part and parcel of the larger and more challenging task not only to create a set of measurable objectives for national governments, but in fact envelop the discourse around 'trust in numbers' with *meaning*; for example, the call for indicators to become more meaningful and open to a far greater variety of stakeholders, who can appropriate and 'believe' in them, rather than simply calculate them, is at the heart not only of education governance, but wider European and global governance developments.

Indeed, the governance of international comparative testing reflects these values. Project boards usually work in conjunction with a large range of consortia of international partners and technical advisors (statisticians, media specialists and, interestingly, philanthropists); they also consult with a vast array of different actor groupings, such as academics, private companies, policy makers, associates, country correspondents, regional working groups and others. Regular training courses are delivered as well as seminars, and regional, thematic and global conferences. All these initiatives suggest sustained efforts to include and create consensus with the greatest number of stakeholders possible. The aim of this paper is to examine how such consensus is achieved; through ethnographic study and sociological analysis of how these meetings are organised and run, it offers a closer view and understanding of the work of governing at the level of the transnational.

2. Theoretical frame and key intermediary concepts

In order to understand this emergent reality, one needs to start with a broad theoretical frame that might help think and analyse the relationship between the production of *knowledge and policy*, as well as examine current trends in that relationship. Ozga (2011) distinguishes 'post-bureaucratic' from conventional 'bureaucratic' regimes, by suggesting that each presupposes a specific kind of knowledge and a specific way of using it. While bureaucratic modes of government require 'established' bodies of knowledge to be translated into 'vertical' relations, post-bureaucratic modes of governance consist rather in attempting to turn actors' autonomy and reflexivity into means of governing. Therefore, instead of placing the state at the centre and consider the national as an autonomous entity (as subsidiarity rules might have defined it in the past), where knowledge is produced by few professionals and academics for the benefit of the 'nation', post-bureaucracy is rather polycentric, by being simultaneously international, transnational, subnational *and* national. As a result, it is made up by a multiplicity of actors taking part not only in the policy process but –

crucially for the focus of this paper– in the production of knowledge. Under post-bureaucracy, ‘knowledge is pluralistic; it is flexible, provisional and it is always policy- and future-oriented’ (Ozga 2011; no page numbers). Above all, it is comparable and can travel fast; it derives its legitimacy not only from scientific knowledge, but also from know-how and experience (Grek and Ozga 2010).

Secondly, the notion of *comparison* is seen as crucial, as it is through processes of constant comparison that national contexts have increasingly shed their bounded logics, in favour of achieving a place in the global ‘order’—even when the national appears as nationalistic at times, it is more often than not because of its relentless exposure to the global ‘other’. In fact, these processes increasingly appear as less and less voluntary –comparison is all-encompassing and often quite heavy-handed, as the example of the PISA study and its effects on the education system in the ‘failing’ Germany has shown (Grek 2009). This is what Freeman described as living in Galton’s world (2011), ‘a world of international interdependence, of the continuous, reciprocal reproduction of global and local... a world of comparison’. In this sense, comparison can be seen as not simply informative or even reflective –in fact, it fabricates new realities and hence has become a mode of knowledge production in itself (Freeman 2011).

A considerable body of research has already focused on the work of international organisations (IOs) in the field of education (see, for example, Henry et al 2001; Lawn and Lingard 2002; Ozga and Lingard 2007; Lawn 2003; Pépin 2006; Shore 2000; Martens 2007); however, this research does not examine the interaction between them. International organisations are often seen as monolithic institutions, or actors with similar interests in a similar context, without attention to the complex set of realities that bring them together and apart over time. In addition, IOs are often also seen as internally stable –this means that divisions of authority, institutionalised norms, expectations and values are thought to be commonly shared by all actors within an IO. Nevertheless, ‘most of the time, [...] at least some of the actors within an IO will be seeking to change at least some of its institutions, whilst others will work to retain their stasis’ (Jullien and Smith 2010; 4). The examination of *actor alliance formation and mobilisation* is hence vital in order to understand these relations –both upstream, i.e. the setting of rules and problem framing, as well as downstream, namely the application and maintenance of rules amongst the actors who are all engaged in competitive relationships (Jullien and Smith 2010).

Thus, one of the key intermediary concepts that has mobilised the research behind this paper is the notion of ‘*political work*’ (Smith 2009), as it is very rich at a number of analytical levels. First, when one studies political work, institutions themselves are not the objects of study *per se*; rather, the focus of the investigation is on the continual cycle of institutionalisation, deinstitutionalisation and reinstitutionalisation of ideas and values within the organisation in question. The study of policy instruments like adult skills testing, can become a particularly fruitful context for such an analysis, as one can examine ‘political work’ as those processes that engender the construction of new arguments and the activation of new alliances, in order to spark processes of problematisation and hence either the politicisation or technisation of the problem in question; subsequently, they either produce change or reproduce institutions, namely actors’ rules, norms and expectations (Jullien and Smith 2010).

Thus and to conclude this section, the paper suggests that in order to analyse global education governance, one needs to bring together two important, interdependent aspects; first, an empirical

sociological analysis of knowledge as communicated through the construction of international tests; and, second, a sociology of the trajectories and positions of European and national education actors and groups who take part in these projects and also 'make' the European education policy space, by being active mediators between the two. Of course, the scope of this paper can only be far more limited than that; thus, it focuses on the processes that influence the production of shared narratives and agendas, adopting the ontological position that their existence is not organic, but rather the product of undertakings that often fabricate and manage rather than reach 'real' consensus.

3. International comparative testing and the skills agenda

Skills and competencies have been central to the OECD's work, as its most high profile international assessment, PISA, has suggested. PISA has had a high impact on curriculum reform in several European countries by pushing education systems in the direction of more 'can-do' dispositions towards education, rather than more traditional pedagogic approaches (Grek 2009). PISA also built the OECD's image as a technically competent and scientifically robust organisation for performing such comparative ranking and ordering of national performance (Ozga et al. 2011). In addition, as we will examine further on, the OECD's DeSeCo project () (1997-2005) was a major effort to provide 'a sound conceptual framework to inform the identification of key competencies, to strengthen international assessments, and to help to define overarching goals for education systems and lifelong learning' (DeSeCo homepage, see <http://www.deseco.admin.ch/>). Finally, prior to the development of the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), the OECD had already conducted two international adult skill surveys: the International Adult Literacy Survey (1994-1998) and the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (2002-2006). It is to these three studies that we will now turn, in order to examine their development and reporting as key in the construction of very specific and influential policy directions in education in Europe in the post-Lisbon era.

a. The development of international adult literacy studies: IALS, ALL and DeSeCo

The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) was the first and largest international comparative study of its kind. Conducted from the early 1990s, it was an innovative study, as it was the first time ever that an international comparative dimension was added to the construction of a literacy survey instrument. Thus, it heralded a new era in the construction and evolution of international comparative studies, as for the first time ever it gave international testing a comparative dimension, where measurement against other countries' performance offered unprecedented visibility and thus exposure. As it was an original and new endeavour, slowly at the start but increasingly later on, IALS boosted confidence in the construction of measurement tools of this kind, increased their persuasive power in regard to their validity and transparency and created substantial revenues to the research agencies administering them. Finally, and perhaps above all, it created a circle of like-minded individuals, a 'magistracy' of influence (Lawn and Lingard 2002), who found in these studies a platform for promoting the problematisation of specific issues, their institutionalisation through their exchanges and the setting up of the study, as well as their legitimisation, in the form of advice to failing countries, once the results were published.

IALS started as a nine-country initiative in 1994 (Canada, France, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland and the US); it grew further later on, as five additional countries joined

in 1996 (Australia, Flemish Belgium, UK, New Zealand and Northern Ireland) and, finally, nine other countries or regions joined the study in 1998 (Chile, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Hungary, Italy, Norway, Slovenia and the Italian-speaking region of Switzerland). By the time the study was complete, it had reached the impressive number of 23 participating countries. It was also the first time that such a study established a cycle of data collection, involving three rounds of testing, thereby managing to get more support and momentum as it went on, as well as improve its tools and techniques. The study was led by the OECD, in collaboration with the European Union and UNESCO, and administered by Statistics Canada, the Educational Testing Service (ETS) and the National Centre for Education Statistics (NCES) – all North American agencies.

IALS examined literacy ‘as a particular capacity [information-processing competency] and mode of behaviour’ and assessed performance levels ‘along a continuum’ (OECD 2000: iii). Individuals from age 16 to 65 took part in the study, with nationally representative samples, in order to ‘provide insights for policy makers responsible for the design of lifelong learning, and social and labour market policies’ (OECD 2000: xiii). In other words, high levels of literacy were presented as the essential ingredient of a flourishing society, without which, according to the study, ‘globalisation, technological change and organisational development’ (OECD 2000: xiii) – the challenges of the twenty-first century – could not be met.

Apart from relating skills to increased earnings, IALS also managed to skilfully connect literacy (and thus the findings of the study) with a range of other outcomes, such as social capital, community engagement, voluntary participation, social cohesion, political participation of women, better health and wider social benefits. ‘Health literacy’, for example, was to become a new measure of the ability of individuals to lead healthier lives, with literacy being seen as a mediating factor in health disparities (Rudd, Colton and Schacht 2000). Through the masterly build-up of such a discourse, IALS – again, for the first time – was transcending the boundaries of education research, as it claimed to show the ‘complex relationships between human capital, economic outcomes and social benefits’ (OECD 2000: 84). Thus, with literacy being turned into not only the *sine qua non* of workplace learning, but almost the *sine qua non* of living, IALS was slowly managing to shift education policy into the foreground of the governance of high-achieving, well-to-do societies in Europe and beyond.

Above all, according to the OECD, IALS established ‘a new standard for providing a theoretical basis for its measurement framework’ (2000: 87-88) – hence, a new logic. It also followed ‘an advanced psychometric approach’, moving the focus to psychometric testing, and thus opening up the field to significant commercial interests. Finally, claiming to have achieved ‘unprecedented levels of reliability in scoring open-ended items across cultures and languages’, the study boasted the decontextualisation of literacy (OECD 2000: 87-88). This was a new argument in the field of literacy studies, which was essentially sidelining the New Literacy studies field; the latter proclaims that literacy has meaning only within its particular context of social practice and does not transfer unproblematically across contexts (Barton and Hamilton 1998). Indeed, the management of the study received a lot of criticism precisely because of the relative lack of literacy specialists involved in its design (Blum, Goldstein and Guerin-Pace 2001: 226), some of whom were taking particular issue with the study’s assumption that a valid common definition of literacy across cultures could be established (Street 1996, Hamilton and Barton 2000). In fact, some critics went as far as to argue that ‘those involved in the IALS research are testers and technicians, committed to quantitative methodologies’ (Hamilton and Barton 2000: 379). In a similar manner, Harvey Goldstein elsewhere

argued that the technical complexity of studies like IALS often acts as a well-built and fixed barrier that protects their designers (usually technical experts), by shielding them away from the critical comments of subject specialists. In fact, Goldstein contends that this is 'fertile ground for the psychometrician to dominate the debate, invoking the high status generally associated with mathematical reasoning', as well as simultaneously attracting 'powerful commercial interests in the shape of largely US testing agencies...as providers of sophisticated know-how' (Goldstein 1998, no page numbers). He continues:

Subject matter specialists are involved in designing questions and tasks but thereafter they assume a much more passive role. If they are brave enough to suggest that some complexities have been overlooked then they may well be dismissed as having not properly understood the technicalities. (Goldstein 1998, no page numbers)

To conclude, IALS created fertile ground for the OECD to push its education policy agenda, through measurement and comparison that would 'provide empirically grounded interpretation upon which to inform policy decisions' (Kirsch 2001: 1). As Irwin Kirsch, director of the Centre for Global Assessment at the ETS, suggested:

...while the chief benefit of constructing and validating a framework for literacy is improved measurement, a number of other potential benefits are also evident. Namely:

- 'A framework provides a *common language and a vehicle for discussing* the definition of the skill area;
- Such a discussion allows us to build *consensus* around the framework and measurement goals;
- An analysis of the kinds of knowledge and skills associated with successful performance provides an *empirical basis* for communicating a richer body of information to various constituencies. (Kirsch 2001: 2, my emphasis)

Finally, the study did what all such studies always do – it created the need for the design and delivery of yet another study of its kind. That was the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALL).

The processes that initiated the construction of ALL can merely be described as the mobilisation of a large number of experts, statisticians and national policy makers in a series of meetings across Europe; of course, most of them were people already having been involved in IALS and thus already in broad agreement about the purposes and operationalization of the new study. Therefore, the first meeting of these actors, hosted by the Swedish Educational Authority (Skolverket), decided to build on IALS in order to create a survey that would look at foundational skills, such as prose literacy, document literacy, numeracy and problem solving, as well as familiarity with and use of information and communication technologies. Statistics Canada suggested that the study be organised as a computer-based assessment of samples of workers derived from within firms in order to produce 'explicit statistical linkages...to isolate the impact of observed skill on economic productivity and indicators of firm success such as employment growth and profitability' (Murray, Owen and McGaw 2005: 13). There was a decision to organise a second meeting of the group, at the University of

Amsterdam, in order to discuss the possibility of such a study. However, the operational implications of fielding a computer-based assessment were insurmountable at the time. A third meeting, closer to the study's home this time at the NCER's headquarters in Washington D.C., concluded 'on pragmatic grounds' (ibid) that the test would be undertaken using the humble paper and pencil and that the sample would be drawn from households rather than the workplace.

As a result of the two meetings, a Project Advisory Group (PAG) was formed in order to work further in refining the transnational comparability of the measures for numeracy, problem-solving, teamwork and practical cognition. Two subsequent meetings of the international study team were hosted by the US National Center for Education Statistics in Washington in 1998, in order to work on more accurate measures for problem-solving, teamwork and computer literacy, resulting in new development teams being recruited and funded by Statistics Canada, NCES and the Governments of Sweden and Luxembourg. Additional meetings were held in the US: first, a meeting of all development team leaders in Washington in January 1999 'to help integrate the different assessments and to provide expert feedback' (Murray, Owen and McGaw 2005: 14); second, another meeting of the development team leaders was held in Princeton in August of the same year 'to review the frameworks' (ibid). Finally, a separate international team developed the background questionnaire for the study.

The sheer number of meetings organised merely to initiate the workings of these groups of experts is such that, analytically, one cannot but underline the significance and impact of meetings in the transfer of ideas at a global level. In fact, it was not simply necessity that pushed their organisation. Instead, meetings became a significant means of pushing the agenda forward, as:

...success in this complex field depends not only on theoretical and empirical work, but also on a constant dialogue and exchange among the various specialists and stakeholders to assure that an iterative process takes place. (Murray, Owen and McGaw 2005: 33) need page number)

Finally, a parallel development to the design and implementation of the ALL study was the development of another project focusing on defining and measuring competences – the Definition and Selection of Competencies: Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations (DeSeCo) project, launched in 1997. DeSeCo was primarily a theory-oriented study (Murray, Owen and McGaw 2005) that would complement the work that was being done in a range of studies, designed either to be implemented in the near future, or taking place at the time. These assessments were TIMSS (the IEA study), IALS, ALL and PISA. More interestingly, DeSeCo, as well as theoretically backing the empirical work that these studies were undertaking, offered another crucial means of support to them, as it facilitated further exchanges and meetings between experts in the field. Indeed, the number and variety of stakeholders involved was wide, as the project brought together 'sociologists, economists, anthropologists, philosophers, psychologists, a historian, education researchers, statisticians, assessment specialists, policy-makers and policy analysts, unionists, employers and other stakeholders' (Murray, Owen and McGaw 2005: xxx), representing various sectors and national and international institutions. As with IALS, drawing on what the study claimed to be 'a common vision of society as a normative anchoring point', DeSeCo built a 'demand-oriented approach to competence', which 'designates a complex action system encompassing cognitive and non-cognitive components', in order to create today's 'flexible, adaptive, innovative, creative, self-directed, self-motivated and

responsible...learner, worker, citizen, family member, or consumer' (Murray, Owen and McGaw 2005: 36).

To conclude this section, three crucial points have to be raised in relation to the history of the development of adult literacy studies in the 1990s and 2000s. Interestingly, all of them, as their designers themselves suggest, moved policy directions and thus policy makers and nations 'towards a common, coherent international discourse on competence and skill development' (Murray, Owen and McGaw 2005: 39). What they have also done – and they themselves proclaim – is create 'a bridge between student and adult competence assessments' (ibid: 42), thus breaking down the boundaries between schooling and the rest of the lifecourse. This is important because after claiming to have achieved decontextualisation, these studies made for the first time a move towards the de-institutionalisation of learning, and thus bringing lifelong learning to the fore of education governance –the late 1990s-early 2000s was the period when lifelong learning was becoming the *sine qua non* of all education policy reforms in Europe. Finally, international comparative testing, as with the studies described briefly above, appear to have created a decisive and undisputed starting point, on the basis of which all similar debate and work would now have to build on; re-inventing the wheel, apart from being time inefficient is also very costly. Finally, they established networks of experts in the field – a field which exceeds the limits of achieving educational success to the much larger and all-encompassing idea of reaching personal and societal 'well-being':

It is important to build future assessment on existing studies, expertise and knowledge, thus not to reinvent the wheel...DeSeCo and ALL have established networks of researchers that can contribute – from different perspectives – to continued research on key competencies and the educational, social, and economic factors that contribute to improve the education and training and to enhanced returns on investments in competencies in terms of personal, economic, and social well-being.(Murray, Owen and McGaw 2005: 43; my emphasis)

4. Expectocracy moves –and rules

The account of the development of the early adult literacy studies shows some of the reasons why international comparative testing became one of the prime instruments in the steering and exchange of governing knowledge in education in Europe today. The stories of IALS, ALL but similarly PISA and PIAAC as other research has shown (Grek 2009; 2012), have created the necessary preconditions for achieving policy understanding, travel, translation and thus, despite local idiosyncrasies and histories, policy consensus. Nonetheless, the narration of a story of meetings, and perhaps more importantly the narration of a story of dinners, drinks and research tourism, could potentially misguide towards the creation of a picture of genuine debate and the building of real friendships and collaborations. Indeed, in one of my earlier papers, I argued for the significance of 'learning by meeting' (Grek 2012) and, following Freeman's work on public policy learning, suggested that,

...increasingly members of this "small community" like each other, they learn to work together, they call one another, and finally become friends. We trust to learn from friends, rather than strangers (Forrester 1999), especially when these friends provide us with the information we need. Friends are those that understand our situation and the values which inform our choices (Freeman 2008); they help us deliberate and offer persuasive arguments to be used in more hostile contexts. (Grek 2012: 56).

Nonetheless, more recent work on the development of the PIAAC study, reveals that the analysis above is perhaps closer to the construction of an ‘ideal-type’ of a policy making world; on the contrary, a close examination of the production and exchange of knowledge and learning transnationally creates quite a different and more complicated picture, rather than the one described above. This is indeed a world of travel, exchange and collaboration and certainly a place where new friendships can be built; nonetheless more often than not these exchanges take place in an increasingly competitive field, where most large international research organisations strive to secure the limited and diminishing funding available from national governments for the conduct of these studies. As a result, collaboration amongst them for the delivery of studies and the collection of education statistics is not a choice anymore, but rather a plain necessity. This is a fairly new development in the field of international comparative testing, the history of which, especially if one is to consider the two main organisations delivering such studies, the OECD and the IEA (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement) has not always been a rosy one –in fact, digging a bit deeper in the relationships between them and speaking with some of the key actors involved in both, one is soon confronted with a history of accusations for the stealing of methods and technical expertise for the delivery of international assessments. On the other hand, a closer examination of the relationship between the OECD and the European Commission Directorate General Education and Culture (DG EAC) is again one of strife and conflict – the ideological struggle between them, although lessened since the launch of the Lisbon Strategy, is still present with some of its staff, who see their own work at DG EAC as focused on the more social and democratic function of education, rather than its direct linking with economic goals and outcomes. Returning to the IEA and OECD’s ‘undeclared war’, the quotation below is enlightening:

The main reason is that they are competitors and both in scientific and in financial terms it is getting more and more difficult to conduct these surveys. There was a message from member states to the OECD and the IEA –get together, sit down and discuss it and do it. Now, 6 months later, we all come together and we ask what was the result of that meeting and the answer was that we didn’t find a date. They don’t work together because they don’t like each other. (EC9)

Interviewees also describe internal conflict within international organisations and their departments, for example within the OECD itself. The following quotation describes the conflict between CERI (the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation) and the Directorate of Education, similar to the kinds of processes Jullien and Smith (2010) describe when they discuss IOs as internally unstable institutions, rather than the opposite:

They live in different worlds –the same floor at the OECD but in different worlds. They don’t like each other –one is more research-based, the other one more indicators and data, surveys. One is more reflection, the other one is more publicity, the charts –different traditions, the same director. (EC12).

Finally, another account which describes the conflict and competition for securing contracts for education research in Europe, comes from another interviewee, a key member of staff of one of the Commission’s research agencies:

I think because the OECD is very much looking for member states’ subsidies and grants and financial support for each separate research activity, they are also keen in showing that they

do something unique and innovative in order to get such funding. And so then in a way they are in competition with us. An example is they did a recent policy review which is called 'Learning for Jobs' which basically deals with VET. And they didn't invite us to some national expert groups and so on that are in development –and they did very little use of our work because they wanted to do something that was different and specific so that they could sell it to the member states –this is my interpretation, of course. But I think that there is this kind of competition, differentiation between European institutions because we are in competition for funding. (EC3)

The quotations above come in stark contrast to descriptions of a field of actors who come together regularly and on equal terms to achieve consensus for the pushing of certain agendas. On the contrary, they highlight the need to also focus our attention and study on those meetings that *never* happen, as well as those actors who are consistently *not* invited to expert meetings. As the case of the New Literacy academics, who were regularly and persistently excluded from the production of the ALL study that we saw above, the quotations in this section direct us to an understanding of a field, which is more often than not riddled with internal and external competition for funding, especially in times of reducing national budgets in an era of austerity. Nonetheless, the emerging data make the whole picture even more interesting, especially given the supposed significance of the meeting for the development of shared understandings (Freeman 2012). Here is another European Commission actor:

We create an expert group, we do the same as the OECD, we ask member states to designate experts. ... Actually member states are represented by different people who have different views around the same questions. Very often I would almost kill myself at the meetings because I would say, well that is what we've just decided with the member states yesterday. And the member states were sitting there, saying we've never heard of it. And we don't agree. ...What you discover ...is that people don't know each other –they don't even know the others exist. They have never heard of them. They come from different institutions, different backgrounds, different interests, policies, objectives. The member states are not even aware of these contradictions. The result of it is that they don't have any influence. (EC10)

And he continues:

... I am not sure if it is in the interest of the OECD or the Commission to solve that problem – because these institutions will benefit from that –the more they contradict each other, the more the institutions decide. And with OECD, surely it is the same. This is so obvious – that's what they do –OECD is Andreas. We always have a joke with Andreas –where he is brilliant, is to conclude. He is fantastic in this – conclusions! He is the conclusions expert – they are in before the meeting (laughs). ... It is very convenient. (EC10)

This paper intended to analyse and explain the significance of the expert travels and moves for the construction of a space of equivalence, where policy objectives can now be shared and where improvement of performance is achieved through constant comparison. At the same time however, as its title tried to suggest as well, it also attempted to give another dimension to this emergent knowledge and policy world, where the 'expert moves' of international organisations, such as OECD's impressive capacity to bring together and effectively steer debate towards pre-determined

decisions –like the very eloquently put quotation above suggests- has effectively become *the* reason why the OECD's influence has been key in the construction of the European education policy space. In other words, OECD's capacity has not only been its ability to 'move' experts around the world and bring them together around the same table, but also to then effectively steer and direct them towards its own pre-specified agenda.

5. Discussion

A number of issues arise from the inquiry above –as this research and analysis of its findings are currently on-going, one could only arrive at some preliminary conclusions. In the introductory sections of the paper I suggested the significance of a combination of a sociological analysis of knowledge and actors in order to cast light on the workings and ways of education governance in Europe today. The concept of 'political work' is therefore a very useful one, as through an observation of the everyday, routine work as identified through the close observation of meetings and detailed analyses of the documents produced through them, one can perhaps appreciate the persistent and continuous labour required before consensus and decision-making can be achieved – in other words, both the necessary movement and travel of experts, but also all those expert OECD moves in order to arrive at conclusions 'together'.

I would suggest that if one was to highlight one key issue from this paper, that it would probably be the relationship between the production of knowledge and policy. In previous work we suggested that if one wants to predict and understand why and where policy is moving towards, then one should be looking at the management of knowledge, rather than policy itself (Grek and Ozga 2010); this is largely confirmed from the description of the development of the early adult literacy studies above. Although there is a vast literature on the knowledge and policy continuum, I would contend that what we are confronted with here is a new governing reality altogether. What was discussed in this paper is not simply a case of knowledge *informing* policy; it is in fact fusion of the two realms in such a conscious and strategic manner that raises very interesting questions regarding the extent of the technicisation and de-politicisation of education problems or, for that matter, the problem of governing *per se*. In a way, the case of the international comparative assessment could potentially be viewed as 'prototypical': we could speculate that studying this example may help us understand a phenomenon of growing significance not only in the field of education governance, but in governing terms more generally: that is, the shift from previous accounts of 'knowledge *and* policy' or 'knowledge *in* policy' to almost a new reality where knowledge *is* policy – it *becomes* policy, since expertise and the selling of undisputed, universal policy solutions drift into one single entity and function.

Thus, drawing on Bourdieu, education governance appears as a field of actors who constantly negotiate and push their own agendas forward; according to Bourdieu (1993), the logic of positionality is what gives the notion of the 'field' meaning. In other words, the positions occupied by the different agents in the field, their advances and withdrawals, relate to their efforts for distinction within this field as an expression of their professional, educational, or other interests. Meanwhile, the structure of the field is neither static, nor does it change in any systematic way. On the contrary, it is endlessly reformulated, according to the agents' struggles for recognition and improvement of their situation. Agents use the force of their capital, economic, social, cultural, or in the case under examination, knowledge capital, to raise their game and advance their front.

Nevertheless, it is the *relational* nature of these advances that gives the field its explanatory significance. In this sense, all expert new and old love-affairs and wars I discussed earlier, appear as not merely a parallel development or processes to be investigated separate from the policy field. On the contrary, it increasingly looks as if this *is* the policy field; it is where ideas move around and either become extinct or rule. This paper has argued that it is not only in the consensus or translations or shared meaning that we need to focus our attention and inquisitive potential on, but also and crucially in the competition and struggles amongst these actors.

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